Our Friend Jennison

"We Seemed to Gain on Our Pursuers; but They Came on as Inexorably as Death."

By Hornor Cotes

Drawing by Frank Tenney Johnson

DO you happen to know the Cubiculum Club? Few do; but those privileged ones find a certain charm in the little quaint old clubhouse on a narrow back street where no traffic comes and scarcely a foot passenger goes by, but close to the throbbing heart of the great city whose roar does not penetrate this quiet precinct, though little more than a stone's throw away.

If you have the right of entrance and go there at midday, you will find ten or a dozen men seated round a long black table whose wooden primitiveness is not hidden by any show of napery. You will find a poet or two, an artist or a novelist perhaps, it may be a doctor or a lawyer or a college professor,—men of letters, editors, dramatists, or newspaper men. Perhaps all are regular frequenters of the place, or there may be a guest from a distance whose name is familiar in print, who comes to the club's daily "nuncheon," to use an old word that the atmosphere of the house suggests. Winstanley, who discovered that monkeys have a language and is now studying its grammar in the African forest, used to come; and poor old Bellisario the actor was constant when he was playing in the city. There are some regular standbys almost daily to be found there, and some who come and go.

Jennison, the special correspondent, when at home, comes several times a week; but at the outbreak of war in the East some years ago of course he was off at once. Life moves swiftly nowadays, and a man you have not seen for a year you have almost forgotten; so that while at first he was missed, the club soon grew accustomed to seeing some one else in the place at table that belonged by general consent to the tall, spare man with keen, deep set eyes and smooth shaven face, topped by the remains of what had once been a good crop of brown hair.

ONE day when he had been gone for about a year, the usual set was at lunch, when the door opened and in came a man whose bearing seemed familiar, but whose flowing gray mustache and bushy white hair nobody recognized. Until he spoke, nobody knew Jennison; but then there was a general outcry of welcome. The poet, sitting at the head of the table, whose up brushed mustaches—since he came back from his summer in Germany—make him look like the Kaiser, rose at once with the ever ready courtesy that marks him and stretched out his hand, exclaiming:

"Why, Jennison! What in the world have you been doing to yourself?"

Nettleby, the young playwright, the top of whose head is like a billiard ball, eying the newcomer through his spectacles with a professional stare, broke out, "Man alive! What kind of make-up is that? Bearded like a pard, and with a wig that doesn't fit!"

Jennison laughed. "No wig at all, Nettleby. It won't come off unless you pull it out by the roots or shave it. I've grown a new crop, that's all."

"But you were bald, man! And what little fringe you had was red, and now you come here with a thatch like Lear's!"

"What little hair I had was brown, not red, my boy. I had a bit of scare out there in Manchuria, and was ill afterward, which made it grow again; but it came in as you see it now."

The doctor across the table looked interested. "A severe nervous shock sometimes bleaches the hair, and it might stimulate its growth if the follicles were not destroyed, I fancy. H'm, yes," he murmured.

But nobody listened to him in the general outcry for the story of such a metamorphosis.

Jennison smiled good humoredly. "Well, if you fellows will wait till I've fed, I'll tell the tale if you want it. I suppose I've got to account to my friends for these white locks until they get used to them."

The usual round the table talk flagged. Banning, a very clever fellow, who will write a scientific work on the subject in which he is an acknowledged authority, or a novel, or a charming book of life in a foreign city, indiscriminately, as the humor seizes him, looked contemplatively at Jennison's locks and then rubbed his own bare poll enviously as he tried to tell a story. "Did I ever tell you this?" he began in his mildly insinuating way. "It's a good story—" But he was cut short by his ribald neighbor, the famous writer of history, who interjected, "No, you never told it here before. Go on, old man!" And Banning, with unfailing good humor, smiled and stopped. Everybody was waiting for Jennison, who finally, pulling meditatively at a cigar, began to talk.

YOU know I was out there with Kuropatkin trying my level best to see what was going on at the front and to get despatches through giving an account of what little they let you see. I was in Liaoyang at the time of the battle, and after the retreat to Mukden made up my mind there was no chance to pay expenses for my paper between the order 'Correspondents to the rear!' and the infernal cold blooded politeness of the press censor, who with profuse apologies suppressed my despatches or altered them to suit himself. This war isn't run in any sort of civilized way" (it was then still going on, you know) "and a newspaper man has a mighty poor show. I made up my mind the best thing to do was to get home and try something else. Coming home I had the little adventure that whitened my hair and so excited the admiration of Nettleby here."

Jennison stopped and drummed lightly on the table with the fingers of one hand, while his eyes took on an inscrutable far away look, as if he was seeing something far beyond the walls of the dining room. The room was silent, and Jennison sat for a minute or two oblivious to his surroundings. Then Herder, a young fellow who is also special correspondent on occasion, scratched a match to light a cigar, and Jennison pulled himself up with a start.

"You see," he explained, "this is the first time I've told the story (I got back only yesterday), and the memory of one or two things shakes me a bit even now, when I think of them. There are some pictures that get burned into one's consciousness. I shall never forget that fellow's face, I fancy—" and a barely perceptible shudder gave a quick little downward jerk to his shoulders. Then he braced up and went on.

"The railroad north was pretty well blocked up carrying wounded and with military traffic, and it seemed the easiest way to strike the Siberian railway on horseback, at Harbin or some point a bit west of it. There was a big, heavy Englishman named Bickerdyke, fifty years old and more, who had been in Mukden a week or so and had got a pretty plain hint that it would be healthier for him to get back where he came from. He represented a London paper and rode a slashing big chestnut he called a Waler. Then there was Lefévre, a French half-pay officer out for 'The Journal des Débats,' who wanted to go home. Both were a very good sort, and we three arranged to go through together, with a couple of Chinese coolies as guides and cooks and a couple of pack ponies carrying the luggage.

WE were just about to start from my quarters in the gray of the morning when there rode up at a brisk canter a man and a closely veiled woman who sat her horse well, was smartly gowned, and made a striking figure. The fellow was a Russian and evidently a gentleman; but I didn't like his looks, somehow, and was inclined to demur when in excellent English he asked that they might join our party as far as Harbin. It was a bit awkward taking two strangers, and one of them a woman; but the Russian met all my objections with an insistence perfectly courteous but hard to shake off.

While we were chaffering about it, the girl put up her veil to arrange her headgear, showing one of the loveliest faces I've ever seen. That was too much for Lefévre, who joined sides with the Russian at once; and, as Bickerdyke never said a word, but sat there looking bored, as usual, the thing seemed up to me, and I had to give in. I thought both of the strangers looked back once or twice after we started, with what struck me as an air of apprehension; but nobody was following us, and it was none of my business anyhow whether these two were skipping out, or why.

"We got on pretty smartly, and made fifty miles or so that day, putting up for the night at a Manchurian village where we managed to get accommodations for man and beast, and started on at daylight the next morning without anything having happened. In fact, everything went smoothly until about noon the fifth day out, perhaps forty miles from Harbin.

"The road was a bit lonely along this part, and we had not passed any Russian troops since morning; when, as we came to the crest of a hill, one of the coolies rode up to me and pointed to a body of horsemen away off in the plain to the northeast. 'Well, what of them?' I asked. The fellow was plainly uneasy, and said he thought they were bandits, as Russian troops would not be likely to be coming from that direction. It seemed pretty far north for a gang of these beggars; but we had heard some rumor of them at the place we had last stopped overnight, and it did not seem impossible. One can take little for granted out there. Bickerdyke whipped out his binoculars and studied these strangers carefully for a few minutes.

"'What do you make of them?' asked Lefévre.

"'There are about a score altogether,' said Bickerdyke, 'and they don't look like regular troops. Hah! They've seen us and changed direction to get in on the road ahead. Russians would hardly bother about that. I fancy they are Chinese outlaws.'

I SUGGESTED that we should run for it. If we were spry, we ought to slip past before they could reach the road ahead of us; but we had no time to lose. Just then there was an exclamation from the Russian, and he pointed to the road behind. Perhaps a couple of miles back we could see a moving